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ABSTRACT

Interventions at the early childhood stage will reap rich rewards in terms of preparing children for schooling and for life, and early childhood development (ECD) programs provide valuable pointers to the way schooling can be improved. ECD is concerned with learning, and is not a peripheral strategy, but the foundation of and an essential part of the continuum of learning. To be successful, ECD programs need to: (1) encourage parent involvement and commitment; (2) be flexible; (3) use informal methods in programs and training; (4) develop a stimulating and relevant curriculum for children and adults; (5) promote opportunities for girls and women; (6) reach the children and families most in need; and (7) forge partnerships with government, private organizations, and donor groups. (MDM)

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ISSUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD)

- A Summary Paper prepared by Kate Torkington, Bernard van Leer Foundation, for the 2nd EFA Forum, New Delhi, September 1993

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Introduction

The paper draws on rich materials: the ECD presentation at the Forum; the paper circulated in advance to Forum participants; the ECD Coalition/Aga Khan Foundation video; the case-studies; the specially-prepared booklet; and the relevant aspects of the other topic papers prepared for the Forum.

The Jomtien Conference acknowledged ECD as a crucial element in basic education, and endorsed the importance of the early stages of development of the child for his/her future success or failure in schooling and in life. Since Jomtien, the serious problems of primary education have shifted attention away from ECD. There is also fear that investment in ECD will mean that primary education will suffer.

Yet ECD continues to make its presence felt and to draw increased commitment from important international development agencies such as World Bank, USAID and UNDP, in addition to the continued commitment from organisations like UNICEF, UNESCO, the Bernard van Leer and other Foundations.

The objective in this paper and in the ECD presentation at the Forum, is, - and here I use the words of Frederico Mayor when he opened the Forum: ' We (in this case the ECD Coalition) are going ahead, we want to take you with us, and we want to look with you at how we can increase the momentum.'

Two main threads run through this summary. These are:

1. Interventions at the early childhood stage (0-6 years) will reap rich rewards in terms of the preparation of your children for schooling and for life.
2. ECD programmes provide valuable pointers to the way schooling can be improved.

Under 1, there are three main points.

a. <u>Early Childhood Development is concerned with learning - how, where and when children learn.</u>

How: evidence shows us that young children learn best through play, exploration and discovery, and above all, through interaction with caring adults and peers.

Where: children are learning in the home and in their community, as well as in the institutional setting of the school or the pre-school.

When: children are learning from birth and even before birth.

The pattern for learning throughout life depends on these early learning experiences.

This was illustrated for me most forcibly on a recent visit to Mobile Creches in New Delhi. This is a programme of care and stimulation for the

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young children of construction workers. Sometimes these children stay in the programme for as little as 4-5months before their parents move on to the next building site. Yet frequently these children return some time later to show how they have been able to take advantage of primary and even later stages of formal education, because they have been cared-for and encouraged to learn before school age.
UNESCO's paper 'Improving Schooling' reinforces the point: *'The first and most essential condition for the success of schooling is a child who is ready and receptive to learning'.*

b. ECD is not a peripheral strategy, it is the foundation of and essential part of the *continuum of learning.*

To detach primary education and deal with it separately denies the fact that learning is a continuous process. Schooling can either foster the process of learning started in the early years or work on the assumption that learning only begins when the child enters formal school. We regret to say that primary schooling seems for the most part to opt for the latter.

c. ECD is a key linking point in the *circle of learning.*

Because ECD is concerned with learning rather than with schooling, it directs its interventions towards all aspects of the child's learning environment - parents, the family, the community, as well as the professionals and paraprofessionals who intervene in the child's life. We want you to be clear that ECD is not represented by the narrow, institutional, often expensive and age-restricted image associated with pre-school programmes. Where pre-school centres are part of programme strategies then the link with parents and the community is seen as a crucial element.
As a result, many ECD programmes merge almost seamlessly with adult education, literacy and population programmes. We regret that adult education has not appeared in the programme of this Forum, so that the circle of learning concept could be reinforced.

Under the second main thread of this paper - ECD's impact on schooling - there are a number of points which we feel would be helpful in addressing the problems of primary schooling in developing countries (low levels of enrolment, drop-out, repetition and failure to reach the girl-child) and which would improve the quality of primary education. They are:

a. Parental Interest, Involvement and Commitment:
This we believe is the key feature of early childhood programmes. It is obtained through:
- parent education strategies in or outside the home setting;
- parent involvement in pre-school institutions;
- parent contribution to identifying needs and planning programmes;
- recognition of parents as the first and continuing educators of their own children.

Through involvement in early childhood programmes, parents' expectations of their children and their respect for education increase.

b. Flexibility:
- ECD programmes are found where children and families are, i.e. they are accessible. In the paper on the Education of Girls and

Women, accessibility was seen as one of the key solutions to the problems of gender disparity.

- They are not mono-focal but use strategies that fit with the community in which they are situated.

c. Use of Non-formal Methods in Programmes and in Training:

- Building on the strengths and the positive cultural practices of parents and trainees.
- Encouraging the growth of confidence and creativity, in children, parents, community members and trainees.
- Giving equal weight to all aspects of development of children and adults - the holistic approach, which takes account of emotional, social, physical, as well as cognitive development.

Most of these points are echoed in the UNICEF paper on non-formal approaches in primary schooling.

d. Development of Stimulating and Relevant Curricula for Children and Adults:

- Using the environment to develop curricula.
- Use of indigenous materials to develop toys and games (as seen in the Kenya video).
- Production of books which are culturally relevant, to help children to read and enjoy reading.

UNESCO's paper, commenting on the situation in primary schools, states: 'Traditional curricula (in primary schools) are often ill-matched to cultural reality and to the socio-economic environment. We need to design a curriculum to fit the child'.

e. Opportunities for Girls and Women:

- ECD programmes cater for and attract equally girls and boys.
- ECD programmes are run mainly by women who gain confidence and self-esteem in the process.

f. Ability to Reach Children and Families Most in Need through:

- Identification with the community of its needs and appropriate and possible solutions.
- Planning and working with the community to address the needs.

g. Forging Partnerships:

- At international level e.g The ECD Coalition for this Forum.
- At national level, between governments, NGOs and donors.
- At local level partnerships between sectors, such as health and education.
- Above all with parents and local communities so that they take on ownership of the programme.

On this issue, UNICEF's paper (op cit) referred to the need for primary schooling to extend the term 'participation' into community 'ownership' over all stages from 'design to evaluation'.

Conclusion;

We hope that Governments, donors, NGOs will join in partnership with us, the Coalition on ECD, to forge ahead with establishing, developing and improving ECD programmes.

Some Questions for Discussion at the Forum:

1. If the rationale behind ECD is accepted what are the constraints on Governments to move towards implementing ECD programmes?

2. Will you share with us examples of ECD programmes in your countries which you feel have been successful and to which your Government is giving support? Why are/have they been successful?

3. How can donors help you to implement ECD programmes?

4. Why are bi-lateral agencies not investing in ECD programmes?